

Damage To A School Classroom

*Four 15 year old boys broke into school buildings
and caused considerable damage. A restorative Justice
Conference took place at the scene of the damage.*

Background

Imran was a 15 year old who lived with his natural parents and younger brother. He enjoyed a positive relationship with his mother who had serious health problems, but tensions between Imran and his father had increased over the last 2-3 years. His father said Imran was a 'model' child until the age of 12, but felt that his attitude and behaviour had deteriorated considerably since then. Imran was a very bright boy but his poor school attendance over the previous 12 months had resulted in Education Welfare involvement. Sanjay, also 15, lived with his natural parents and a younger brother and sister. Sanjay was described by his school as 'underachieving' and whilst not overtly disruptive, he had a flippant attitude towards schoolwork. Sanjay's mother was very worried about the people he was currently associating with and constantly worried about him re-offending. Sam was a 15 year old who lived with his parents and older sister. There were no concerns relating to Sam's family or school situation. His current offence came as a shock to everyone who knew him, and was considered to be completely out of character. Karim was a 15 year old who lived with his natural parents, a younger sister and two brothers, as well as several members of his extended family. Karim's father was a businessman who employed over 1,000 workers. He spent long hours working and often travelled abroad. Karim's family's home was a substantial house in an affluent area. Karim's mother spoke very little English. Karim was a bright boy but he was under-achieving at school. Punctuality was identified as one of the problems at school. All four boys received a Final Warning for their part in two offences of burglary other than a dwelling. None of them had any previous criminal history.

The Offence

The young people had been playing football on school premises during a bank holiday afternoon. Two schools (one junior, one high) shared the same site. The boys had found an insecure fire exit at the junior school, entered the mobile classroom used by four-year-old children, and found green powder paint. Between them they threw powder paint liberally around the classroom, staining floors and ceilings, work top surfaces and some of the children's work on display. They ate biscuits, which they had found in a desk, stole a small amount of change from the cash tin, and painted nail varnish on the surface of a small cooker used by the children. The boys then broke a small window on the ground floor of the neighbouring school. One of them climbed in and let the others in. The alarm was activated and all four left the

building and began to run away. Having received a call from a nearby resident prior to the alarm activation, police officers arrived at the scene in time to catch two of the boys, Sam and Karim. Imran and Sanjay were arrested later.

Arrest

All four boys initially denied any involvement in the offences and told a series of lies to the police. They eventually admitted to their individual roles in these crimes and all four received Final Warnings. During assessments for interventions by a Police Constable from the Youth Offending Service, Karim, Sanjay and Imran expressed remorse, and agreed to take part in a restorative conference with school staff. Sam lived in another Youth Offending Team (Yot) area and a Police Constable liaised with the Yot. Approximately three hours was spent with each young person discussing the offence and preparing for a restorative conference. A Police Constable visited the Head teachers from both schools to explain restorative justice principles, and to invite them to take part in a restorative conference. Both readily agreed to take part, and the Head Teacher of the junior school suggested that it might be appropriate for the Teacher of the four year olds in the damaged classroom to take part too. She was invited and agreed to participate. The preparation of these victims took one hour per person. A date for a meeting was agreed but it was difficult to arrange because the school summer holidays had started and the preferred venue was the damaged classroom. The young people and their families all had holiday plans too. Sam had been visited by a Restorative Worker from the local Yot, and Sam said he was happy to participate in the face-to-face process, although his parents were not fully supportive of a restorative process. As Sam and his parents were going to be abroad for the agreed date, he wrote a long letter in which he took responsibility for his actions during the offence and offered a sincere apology. Sam knew that this would be read at the meeting by a Yot worker who would be representing him.

The Meeting

The meeting took place just after school in the mobile classroom damaged during the offence. Imran and Karim were supported by their fathers and Sanjay by his mother. They were all nervous.

After introductions each boy gave an account of his involvement in the crime and apologised for the trouble that he had caused. Sam's letter was read out by a Yot worker. The junior school Head Teacher explained the impact on the elderly Premises Officer who had been called out by the police on the day of the crime. He had been due to visit his seriously ill sister in hospital

at the time, but had to stay to clear up the mess and help to secure the premises. His sister had died that day and he had been unable to see her. The Head Teacher of the high school explained that, due to the rise in insurance premiums because of the burglary, they had not been able to buy several new computers for the school that had been ordered. These had had to be cancelled. All of the boys had attended this school before moving to their current college. The classroom teacher gave a most moving account of the impact that their crime had had on the four-year-olds. She told them that they could not understand why someone would want to ruin all their work, which she explained was not just odd paintings but a diary chronicling their progress throughout the school year. The parents also spoke very eloquently of the shock, shame and embarrassment that they had felt on hearing of their sons' behaviour. Sanjay's mother was very tearful and began to take responsibility for her son's behaviour. The Police Constable reassured her that the meeting did not seek to sit in judgement of the boys or their parents, but to enable them to take responsibility for their actions. This meant apologising directly and trying to understand fully the impact of their offending on those people it had affected the most. The Infant School Teacher then spoke of a £50 camera that had gone missing and had not been recovered. This had not been spoken about during the preparation period. The Police Constable spoke to the boys and their parents about whether they had any knowledge of this camera. No information was offered. The Police Constable asked whether there were any suggestions as to how this could be resolved. Karim's father suggested that each boy could pay £12.50 towards the cost of the replacement camera. All parties were in agreement. The Yot worker said she would feed this back to Sam. This conference was successful in that all three victim satisfaction surveys were returned and were all positive. Three out of the four boys have not re-offended.